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2 December 1972

Central Intelligence Bulletin

CONTENTS

25X1

LAOS: Communists may soon break lull in fighting around Plaine des Jarres. (Page 2)

USSR-CSCE: Soviets trying to smooth path at preparatory talks. (Page 3)

25X1

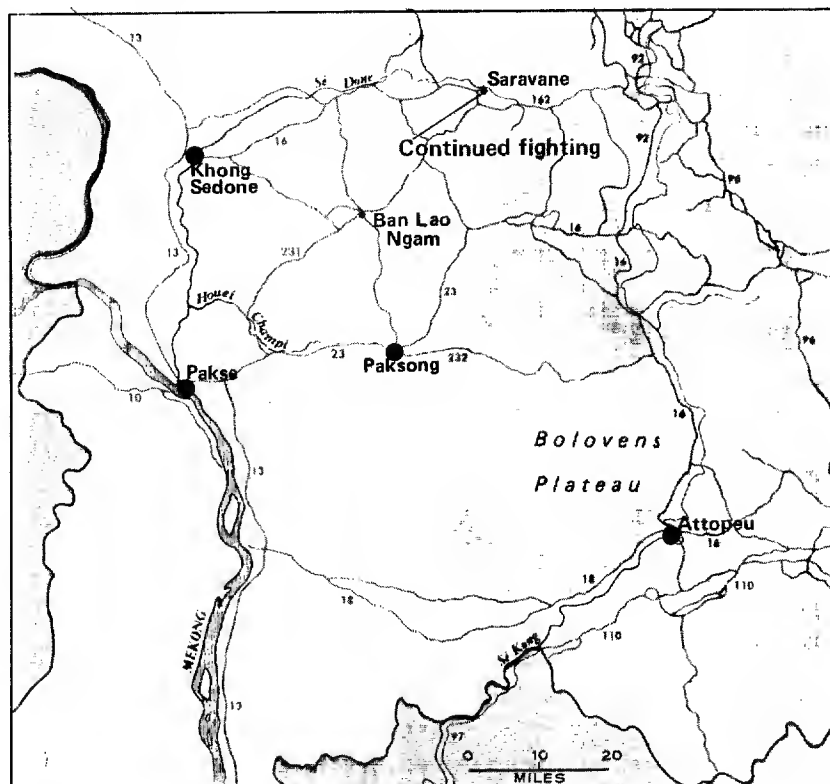
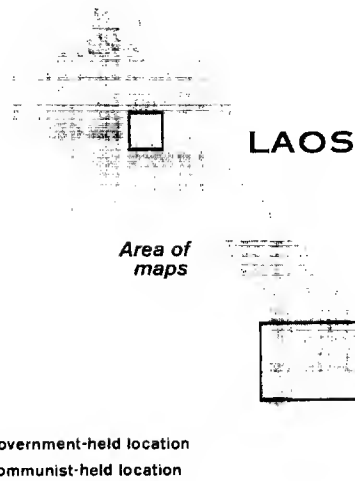
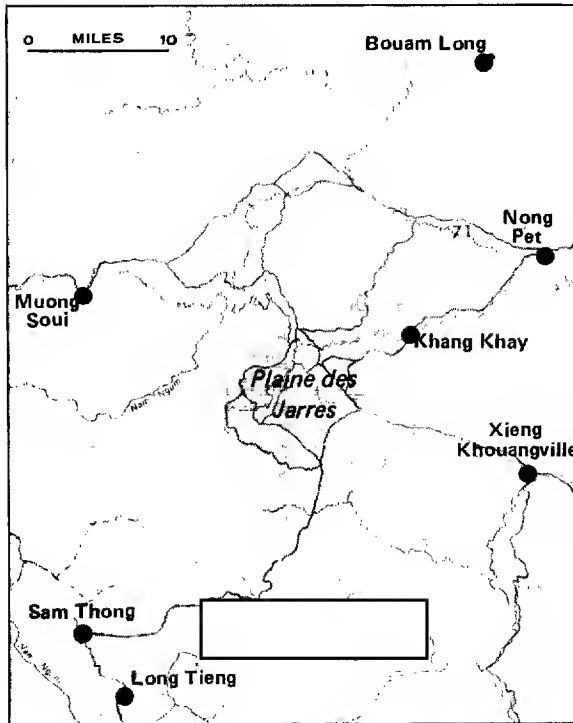
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25X1

LAOS: The Communists may be preparing to break the three-week lull in fighting around the Plaine des Jarres.

25X1

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Communist units appear to be making preliminary preparations for an attack on Bouam Long, the government's only significant base north of the Plaine. Bouam Long, which supports guerrilla operations against enemy supply lines, has long been a thorn in the Communist side.

25X1

In south Laos, North Vietnamese troops moved into Saravane on 30 November following a heavy shelling attack and are now battling irregular units for control of the town, which has changed hands three times in the past month. The Communist counter-attack followed a week of sharp skirmishing as reinforcements from the North Vietnamese 968th Division moved into the area to bolster Communist units which had suffered heavy casualties during earlier fighting. [REDACTED]

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USSR-CSCE: The Soviets are making every effort to avoid controversy and to ensure the smooth progress of the CSCE preparatory talks.

Moscow's main concern during the first ten days in Helsinki has been to keep the preparatory talks moving rapidly. Although the Soviets were privately annoyed over Romania's attempts to stake out an independent position, they limited open opposition to a single intervention in the discussion. By avoiding a prominent role in dealing with the potentially disruptive Romanian procedural proposals, they helped the talks slide past a rough spot into areas of greater substantive interest. The Soviet delegation did successfully lobby to make the first general statement, but the speech itself was a bland reiteration of standard positions.

Soviet delegates have sought assiduously to establish friendly working relations with the Western delegations. Even before the talks began, they expressed a desire for frequent consultations with the US delegation, and Ambassador Mendelevich has taken the initiative on several occasions. Ambassador Zorin has apparently been assigned a similar role toward the French and Belgians, and his efforts at friendly persuasion inspired a NATO diplomat to describe him as an "amorous alligator."

Soviet tactics at the talks were exemplified in a conversation Mendelevich had with the US delegation on 29 November. He suggested a compromise was possible on the order in which items were considered in the preparatory talks, and he offered a "gentlemen's agreement" not to raise controversial issues if the talks were kept going during the NATO ministerial meeting on 6-8 December.

Following the Mendelevich approach--but apparently not greatly influenced by it--the NATO delegations decided not to propose a recess. Instead, they will try to ensure that no substantive decisions are made in Helsinki while the NATO ministers are meeting in Brussels. They will also propose a holiday recess to begin on 15 December. In spite

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of Soviet opposition, most of the allies favored a break for the ministerial talks, but reconsidered in deference to the Romanian and neutral delegations who want the Western allies to avoid actions as a bloc. The neutrals have offered, in return, to help keep the talks damped down next week.

The current pace of the talks and the probable break for the holidays may well mean that the Helsinki deliberations will go beyond 31 January, when the initial talks on mutual and balanced force reductions are scheduled to begin. It is unlikely that the delegations will be able to do much more than take initial soundings on substance before the holiday recess. Although all the participants will try to keep the talks on a businesslike basis, it is likely that the discussion of the conference agenda will be neither so smooth nor so noncontroversial as the Soviets would like.

25X1

25X1

2 Dec 72

Central Intelligence Bulletin

4

25X1

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25X1

Approved For Release 2004/07/08 : CIA-RDP79T00975A023300060002-5

Next 7 Page(s) In Document Exempt

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